

REVISIONES

MARÍA ISABEL RUEDA

Dark Diary

Maria Isabel Rueda, *My Naked Drawing (fragment)* from the series "My Drawing Is in Your Hands," 2010. Ink on paper, 25 x 21 cm



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Gallery A

In 2007, María Isabel Rueda (Cartagena, 1972) took the first pictures of the Puerto Colombia pier (*Más allá* [Beyond], 2009), a place she would return to on several occasions, and where she would eventually take up residence, a few blocks from the sea. That is where she lives today, the wind blowing through her house during the breeze period, as if it were going to destroy everything in its path. That is also where *La usurpadora* is located, an independent art project that she runs with Mario, her partner and coworker. The dock, once the grand gate for immigrants who found in Colombia their final destination, stands today as a fragile reminder of a prosperous past and of the passage of time, and as a twarning of a likely ending. This pier also serves as a standing structure, incomplete but recurrent, of her relationship with the world and her own work.

Ten years earlier, Rueda finished her undergraduate thesis in Fine Arts with *Vampiros en la sabana* [Vampires in the Savannah, 1999], a series of analog photographs of gothic women, more or less close to the artist -some friends or college classmates, some simply pedestrians- who had embraced the dark side and made up an urban tribe that swarmed the surroundings of the Universidad Nacional and downtown Bogotá. These images herald themselves as both magical and impossible, for, as it is known, vampires cast no reflection on mirrors and therefore should not appear in analog photographs, a circumstance that turned the photographic device into a means to record the immaterial.

And yet, merging with their surroundings are the portraits of these "B" characters, a category that Rueda uses to refer to those who live at the margins of normality, outliers to the norm, much like B movies. These types of characters, part magical, part rejects, part seductive, are ones the artist would revisit in other series such as *El museo del hombre* [Museum of Man, 2004] and *Hombres lodo* [Mud Men, 2008].

Ever since, María Isabel has been interested in the occult, the abnormal, and the supernatural, interests she delicately describes in a long series of drawings where love and communion with the world are also central subjects. These images -static or in motion, as is the case of the digital animations she creates using them- constitute a portrait of the artist's surroundings, not in terms of

the physical environment she inhabits, but rather that of a broader reality, a cosmos or universe through which she navigates. The drawings document her travels and research, and stand as a testament of her inner world. Structured in several series such as "La mano en el fuego" [Walking on Hot Coals, 2008], "Felicidad clandestina" [Clandestine Happiness, 2008] and "Horror vacui" (2007) -her master's thesis-, they describe her reality based on fantasy and desire, but also the relationship between human experience and artistic categories such as conceptual art, shamanism, mediums, technique, and transpersonal and paranormal experiences.

In Rueda's work, technical transmutation, the possibility of working in and with a medium or technique based on another's precepts, is determining: a drawing that is conceived as a photograph or a video that exists as a moving drawing. *Dibujos con melanina* [Drawings with Melanine, 2006], for example, consists of a series of portraits of people with freckles, alluding to the gesture of "drawing" with light on a person's skin. This series proposes a correlation between such reaction of the cutaneous pigment and the idea of drawing as generating an image made up of several points. Much like with analog photography, the subjects in these photographs serve as a metaphor for photographic paper and the light-sensitive granules that produce an image when exposed to light, which again, shows the closeness that in her work acquire apparently distant elements and materials.

Her interest in unveiling the occult led Rueda to create portraits of places, people and stories that result dark only in light of the modernist idea of progress, where clarity is the symbol of rational meaning, as is palpable in her photo series of artist Norman Mejía's house (*The Real. Retrato de Norman Mejía* [The Real. A Portrait of Norman Mejía], 2013); or in a film shot in the entrails of Niagara Falls (*Experiments in Long Distance Influence*, 2012), a work that reveals her continued interest on the relationship between background and figure or form, which in turn serves as a framework for the fall of water but that, as in other cases, tends to disappear. To Rueda, darkness and light represent not a threat, but rather the essence of things, their core or place of origin. That which -in the words of Hannah Arendt- can only exist as long as it is not exhibited, such as goodness or kindness.

This reflection on background and figure is widely influenced by Bataille's ideas and those of his followers. One of them, Roger Caillois, wrote an article for the magazine *Documents* on mimetism, where he argues that animal camouflage is not meant to ensure their survival, as their disguise or concealment is part of the realm of vision -of the visible-, while it is the sense of smell -the perceptible- which plays a key role in hunting, a notion that is contrary to the habitual explanation for entomological mimetism.

In this light, mimetism is not considered to be an adaptive behavior but ultimately, a particularly psychotic submission to the dictates of space. It represents a certain inability to maintain the limits between the exterior and the interior, between background and figure: thus are erased the outlines of their own integrity, their own self-possession. The body is undone, it turns deliquescent, it becomes disaggregated, duplicating its milieu in order to be possessed by its own surroundings, by space. This possession reproduces a replica that actually constitutes a vanishing of the figure. Background on background, shadow in the shadow.

As one can tell from her recursion to the Puerto Colombia dock, time is an on-going concern in her work: either through the photographs of starry nights in which she looks into the past of the universe (*Oscuro diario de estrellas* [Dark Diary of Stars, 2009]; or the daily drawing of a leaf fallen from a tree in her front garden that she made for an entire year (*El libro de las hojas* [The Book of Leaves], 2014). Her work is intrinsically linked to her life, the passing of days, our journey through this world, and dissolution. Thus, *Lágrimas de Isis* [Tears of Isis, 2015] depicts a journey down the Nile that may be well interpreted as a metaphor of our brief passage through this dimension. Time, for Rueda, as in most Eastern religions, is cyclical and not linear; which is why her works always go back to the origins, why they are always presented in a loop.

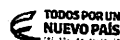
Maria Isabel Rueda. Dark Diary is the first in a series of exhibitions organized by the Medellín Museum of Modern Art entitled Revisiones - dedicated to reviewing the works of mid-career Colombian artists-, which revisits almost two decades of her career. Rueda is part of a generation whose work is defining the present of our country's art, currently in the process of being consolidated, and which adheres to a broad vision of the contemporary. From her first photographic works to her vast production of drawings, videos and publications, Rueda's work is the B-side of a journal on life, on what is untold, what is unseen.



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